

Flesh

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Five

Stanztrigger

Boyd was up and running in an instant. With his gun exhausted, he determined to use the only weapon now available to him: his body. He rammed Stanztrigger in the midriff with his shoulder, grappling the Moreau about the waist. Their momentum propelled them backward and through the galley door, to trip over the raised lip that kept the water in the corridor at bay. They fell to the deck in the corridor, water splashing over them.

Boyd was first up, holding the submerged Stanztrigger by the throat as his other fist came back instinctively.

*That's it! Kill him! Kill him now!*

He faltered. No. That wasn't why he was here. He just wanted Tat—

Stanztrigger's fist erupted from the water, thundering into Boyd's temple. Lights flashed before his eyes as he fell sideways and hit the corridor wall. He slumped against it for an instant, dazed—an instant that was all Stanztrigger needed. With astonishing speed and a snarl that was as primal as it was guttural, he exploded from the water and seized Boyd about the shoulders with his long, clawed fingers.

*Wake up! Wake up, you useless—*

Lifting Boyd from his feet, Stanztrigger slammed him against the wall, driving the breath from his body.

*Do something, you idiot!* The voice in Boyd's head was screaming now. *He's going to kill you!*

Stanztrigger drove Boyd into the wall once more. The Moreau's face was a sneering mask of teeth and blazing anger as he seized Boyd about the neck with both hands, turning to throw him across the corridor. Boyd flew through the air, trailing blood and spittle, before hitting the wall hard and falling to the deck with a splash, half submerged in the squalid water.

The next moment, and through a dizzy fug, Boyd found himself being hauled out of the water by Stanztrigger's skeletal hands. Now the Moreau held him fast, pinned him to the wall by the neck, and he was unable to move, to concentrate on anything more than trying to draw breath. As he gulped and gasped, the cold, hard barrel of a pistol was forced against his temple.

“Please...wait. I'm not...” He raised his hands in gesture of surrender. “I'm not here to fight you.”

Stanztrigger didn't answer. Instead he leaned close, his nose against Boyd's face as his nostrils flared.

"What are you doing?" Boyd asked, mystified.

There was no immediate answer, just a series of deep inhalations. Stanztrigger seemed to consider each one as though tasting wine. His hot breath—like his ship—was tainted with decay. When he finally spoke, his voice had the low, thick quality of a growling engine. "I smell war. Blood. Satsumas. Pine." A further sniff. "A lost love, and a new attraction. I smell dependency. I smell..." He pulled back, eyes narrowed as he peered at Boyd. "I smell mutation. But I don't smell Calci."

Boyd coughed, holding his throat. "Mutation? What the fuck do you mean?"

Stanztrigger shook him again. "Don't take that tone with me, boy. I'll not allow such language on my ship."

Boyd gasped, struggling to breathe. "You're joking, right?" It was a long time since anybody—even Ivan—had admonished him for bad language.

Stanztrigger ignored the question. "How did these Calci get on my ship?"

"They attacked us. We managed to escape, but there are Calci bodies on the *Troika*. I don't know how they've managed to get here as well."

"And why are you here, why are you on my ship?" The Moreau leader looked him up and down with disdain. "Why are you wearing Lev's clothes?" He leaned close, snarling into Boyd's face. "Why does the blood of Calci taint my crew?"

"I don't—"

Stanztrigger shook him like a naughty boy. "Why? Answers! Now!"

"I don't know! I only came for the girl! For Tatiana!"

"Then you're from this '*Troika*' as well?"

"Yes. Your men. They took her. I came to get her back."

"And what of the Calci? What is your connection with Crepitus?"

Boyd blinked. "Crepitus?" Surely Stanztrigger couldn't believe he had anything to do with the Calci. He searched Stanztrigger's face looking for answers. He saw nothing in those hooded eyes and scowling brow than unbridled anger and suspicion. "There's no connection, Stanztrigger," he said. "No connection at all."

"So you're not one of his agents?"

"Fu... Hell, no."

A pause, and Stanztrigger let him go, turning away as Boyd fell to the deck with a splash. "Chaff said something about Moz eating the flesh of a corpse. I can only assume he became infected with the blood of the Calci, and now it runs amok on my ship." He cursed quietly and punched himself in the thigh. "I should have realised it was the Calci when Chaff told me about the corpses on the *Troika*."

Boyd rose to his feet unsteadily. "You sound like you've met the Calci before—and Crepitus."

“Met?” Stanztrigger’s laugh was heavy and humourless. “Fought. Decades ago. The Beggar Barons of Charon paid me handsomely to destroy him. He was ancient then, The Lord only knows what condition he’s in now.”

“I’m guessing you weren’t successful?”

Stanztrigger’s glare bore into Boyd. “Would the Calci be here if I were?”

“Fair point.”

Stanztrigger raised his pistol again and trained it on Boyd’s head. “Still, I should just kill you now.”

Boyd spread his hands. “What’s the point of killing me? What’s the point in fighting? All I want is to get Tatiana back to the *Troika*, and to get off this planet and away from Crepitus. That’s all.”

“Yet you’ve killed six of my men that I know of. And my cook is missing.”

“You stole from me.”

Stanztrigger kept the pistol trained on Boyd, but the expression on his face shifted. Boyd discerned the slightest nod, and a raise of one eyebrow. “That,” he said, “I can understand.” He lowered his gun.

“Look, you and your crew, you’re trapped here, right? Your ship’s bugged, and so’s the *Troika*. So why don’t we work together? Let’s take out these Calci, and see if—between the *Tower* and the *Troika*—we haven’t got enough parts to get everybody of this planet.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Why shouldn’t you? Why would I want to double-cross you? You’re the one with the loaded gun.”

Stanztrigger didn’t reply. Holstering his pistol, he reached into one of the pouches on his flak-vest and produced something delicate and gold. It took a moment for Boyd to realise what it was: a pair of pince-nez. With a single stride Stanztrigger was in Boyd’s face, the Moreau fixing the tiny spectacles across his nose with his bony fingers. He squinted through them, peering into Boyd’s eyes. But Boyd held the Moreau’s stare. He didn’t blink. He didn’t need to. If Stanztrigger was looking for duplicity or treachery, he wouldn’t find any.

Again the nod and the raised eyebrow. “Very well. Get this girl, this Tatiana, and we move out. We stand together. But, be warned: if you cross me, I’ll crucify you.”

Boyd nodded curtly. “Understood.”

#

Upon seeing Tatiana for the first time, Stanztrigger had seemed stunned, kneeling to inspect her through his pince-nez. Then he’d gone onto all fours, sniffing her in that unnerving, primal way. “I smell courage. Grief. Determination. Infatuation,” he had said. “An exceptional beauty, but fading fast. She needs medical attention. You’ve stemmed the bleeding, but there are internal injuries to contend with.”

Now, with Tatiana over his shoulder, Boyd and his new ally stepped into the *Tower*’s benighted sick-bay. Boyd’s eyes narrowed as he swept his reloaded pistol in a wide arc across the bloody medical centre. There may have been white sheets and walls at

some point, but now all that could be seen were various shades of smeared crimson and crusty purple. The air was tainted with the smell of rotting flesh.

*Party's started without us, Boyd.*

"Oh, so now you're back," Boyd said, muttering under his breath. "You were pretty quiet when I was being grilled by Stanztrigger."

*Well, you seemed so happy playing Doctor Doolittle with goat-boy that I didn't want to intrude.*

"Put her here, quickly," Stanztrigger crossed to a bed and tore its bloody sheets aside.

Boyd complied, moving to the bed and setting Tatiana down and gently. He looked at her. Unconscious, her breath was irregular and shallow, the vivid blue of her skin paling by the second. Her lips were turning white.

"There," Stanztrigger said, pointing to a door at the end of the room. It was almost lost amongst the panorama of blood. "That's the store room. Get me Nandomine, Vapour, sterile dressings, and a *very* big needle."

Boyd moved swiftly away from Tatiana's bed, intent on reaching the store, when he pulled up short, squinting in the darkness of the sick-bay. He could see a leg protruding from between two of the bay's empty beds. It too was smothered with blood.

*Be careful, Boyd...*

"I know what I'm doing," Boyd edged forward with slow, long strides, focusing on the leg. As he neared the gap between the beds, he could make out more of the figure. The leg ran up to a pair of hips. Then he saw the other leg was missing, and a rent, gaping stomach nestled in the ripped remnants of a doctor's smock. Moving forward, he saw a chest, then shoulders, splayed arms that twitched, and finally the head of a pig Moreau. It turned toward Boyd, and its rotten teeth bared in a snarl as the animated corpse tried to reach for him, clawing at the air.

"I think I've found one of your crew, Stanztrigger." He didn't take his eyes off the doctor as he raised his gun, training it on the poor creature's head.

There was no reply. Boyd glanced to his side. Stanztrigger had vanished. Boyd froze. He listened. He could hear something. The sound of a struggle coming from where Stanztrigger had stood—the sound of grunting and knuckles pounding flesh and bone.

*Boyd!*

"Not now."

*Boyd! Calci!*

"I've seen him, alright?" Boyd turned back to the doctor.

*Not him, you idiot! Him!*

Boyd turned on his heel and crouched. But it was too late. Brandishing the doctor's half-eaten leg as a weapon, a further Calci hit Boyd hard across the forehead. His right eyebrow split, sliced by the leg's exposed bones, and blood flooded into one eye as he fell backward between the beds, dazed. His grip, however, tightened on his pistol.

*Get up! Get up!*

His vision cleared almost instantly, the pain and fear vanishing. He'd literally fallen into the doctor's lap, his shoulder filling the void where the stomach should have been, and now the doctor grabbed at him, holding him by the shoulder and forehead as it craned its body into a sitting position. Above Boyd, the lurching guard reached for his neck.

The Calci's mouths were open, teeth exposed. Their eyes twinkled, and Boyd could have sworn a smile distorted the guard's flaccid mouth.

"Not today, boys," Boyd said through gritted teeth. "Places to go, people to see."

He swept his leg across the deck, taking the guard's feet from under him. The guard toppled backward with a frustrated, primal howl as Boyd elbowed the doctor in the face. The Calci's features collapsed in a cascade of viscous blood and mucus as Boyd now turned and grabbed at its head, slamming its porcine face into the deck.

The doctor's arms flailed, but something else pricked Boyd's peripheral vision. The guard was on its feet now, bearing down with a slavering greed. Boyd raised his pistol fluidly and, still blinking blood from his eye, he emptied the gun into the creature. Bullet after bullet smashed into its head, reducing it to little more than a miasma of bone, blood, teeth and brain. The body remained on its feet for a moment, staggering and ill co-ordinated, before it fell sideways onto the bed to its right.

Still the doctor tried to seize him, despite its bludgeoned mess of a head. It grabbed Boyd by the face, its grip weak. Boyd turned back to it, and revolving the empty pistol in his hand, set about the doctor's forehead with the gun's butt. It didn't take long for him to split the skull open and expose the brain. It took even less time to reduce that brain to a paste, the doctor's haphazard attack coming to a stop.

*Nice work. You're quite the brute, aren't you? I like it.*

Boyd stood, his stolen uniform now ripped and covered in gore. Wiping the blood from his eyes, he stepped out from between the beds. "Will you *please* shut *uaack!*"

Stanztrigger was back, his fists choked with foul smelling blood that was also spattered across his face and flak-vest. He seized Boyd by the throat, lifting him from the deck. "Damn you, Crepitus!" he bellowed. "Godless scum! How dare you do this to my crew?"

"It's me!" Boyd managed to gasp. "Not Calci! Boyd!"

Stanztrigger paused, squinting. Leaning forward, he sniffed at Boyd. "I am sorry," He put Boyd down. "I became confused. The blood on your clothes. You reek of Calci."

Boyd rubbed his neck. It was already bruising where Stanztrigger had held him by the throat. "Christ on a bike, Stanztrigger. Try wearing your damn glas—"

Stanztrigger slapped him hard across the face. The blow sent the stunned Boyd staggering two paces. His hand went to his stinging cheek "What the...?" Damn it if those weren't tears in his eyes. Nobody had slapped him since his Da had died. "What was that for?"

"Blasphemy." With that, Stanztrigger turned and strode to Tatiana's bed, leaving Boyd to watch him, slack-jawed and incredulous.

#

The supplies Boyd found in the store had been meagre but there were enough to do the job. Now Tatiana was stabilised, with Stanztrigger administering Nandomine for

her pain, Vapour to boost her strength. He's used a long needle to pierce her chest, released air pressure building up inside her punctured chest-cavity, and a sterile dressing to act as a one-way valve puncture, allowing air out, but not in.

Boyd had watched him the whole time. The Moreau's hands moved with a deftness and delicacy Boyd would never have attributed to a creature with such a brutal reputation and history of violence. With Tatiana—who remained unconscious—stabilised, Stanztrigger had unzipped his flak-vest and, delving inside it, produced a crucifix on a gold chain. Kissing the tiny cross, he had lowered his head, lips moving in prayer as his eyes closed. Again, Boyd wondered at the dichotomy this towering creature presented.

“That's the best I can do,” Stanztrigger now said, tucking the cross back into his flak-vest and removing his pince-nez. “She needs more thorough attention, but at least she'll live long enough to get her back to your vessel.” He stopped. “What? What are you staring at?”

“Oh, errr, sorry, I was just...” Stanztrigger glared at him, and he had to gather himself to finish the sentence. “Religion. I never really thought Moreaus'd have much use for it.”

“Created as slaves. Treated with disdain. Viewed as expendable. Yes, human, I can see why you'd think we wouldn't need a little faith.” Before Boyd could reply, a muffled buzzing came from within one of the pouches on Stanztrigger's flak-vest. He quickly reached into the pouch and lifted his comm to his lips. “Stanztrigger.”

“Sir, this is the bridge.” The voice was timid and quivered with unbridled fright. “The Pantry. It's been compromised.”

“Compromised?” The Moreau's brow furrowed. “Elaborate.”

“The guards have either abandoned their posts, or have been killed by some...*things*. The sensors on the cages have all been triggered. Whatever killed the guards is now loose in the pens.”

Stanztrigger's head went down, and his eyes closed. “Understood. What about you? Is the bridge secure?”

“No, sir. One of the doors is jammed. We're trying to seal it, but it'll take time.”

“Remain where you are.” Stanztrigger turned to look at Boyd. “I am coming to get you.”

“Aye, sir.”

“What's this ‘Pantry’?” Boyd's hands were on his hips. He wasn't going to like the answer, he knew.

“A holding area used to house a hundred or so descendants of the slaves we had onboard when we crashed.”

“Your food?” Boyd's stomach lurched. He shouldn't have been surprised, the notoriety of Stanztrigger's Eaters should have prepared him for that, but still...

“Our food.”

“They got religion too?”

Stanztrigger ignored the question. He gestured at the remains of the Calci strewn about the deck. “For every victim the Calci devour, they'll merely wound two more,

infecting them, condemning them to a purgatorial, flesh-eating existence somewhere between life and death.”

“So, assuming whatever’s loose in the Pantry *are* Calci—”

“Then, right now, they’re making more. Within the hour we could have close to seventy Calci at large on my ship.”

“Will they find us?”

“The Calci smell two things: fear and flesh. They’ll find us. Now, grab Tatiana. We are leaving.”

#

*This is crazy, Boyd. Just shoot this smelly idiot in the back and let’s get out of here.*

“Shut up,” Boyd whispered under his breath. “If we’re going to have any chance of getting out of here, any chance of beating the Calci, any chance of repairing the *Troika*—any chance *at all*—we need Stanztrigger.”

They’d ascended the *Tower* swiftly, using stairs that spiralled around a massive conduit that rose through the entire vessel. This spinal column was housed in a bigger, sparsely lit chamber, and a long drop awaited anybody who might stumble off the stairs. It may have had railings once, but they were long gone. A crisp cold nipped at them as their breaths steamed, and the disembodied echoes of gunfire, shouts and screams echoed from the decks below.

Boyd jogged after Stanztrigger as the Moreau left the staircase, moving with purpose and poise along one of many narrow mesh bridges that married the stairs to the decks beyond the chamber’s walls. For all Stanztrigger’s pace, Boyd was surprised how easily he kept up with him, even with Tatiana over his shoulder.

Now, stepping into a corridor, Boyd could see the doorway to an altogether different bridge. The *Tower*’s central command. The great hall from which the ship—in its glory days—would have been guided to victory after bloody victory. Its door was still open, and the darkness beyond seemed to mock them.

Stanztrigger stopped and began to reload his revolver. Popping the chamber outward with a deft click of his wrist, he inserted bullets the calibre of which made Boyd’s eyes water.

Assessing their surroundings, Boyd looked down. “Stanztrigger?”

“I see it.”

Several trails of blood ran from the length of the corridor, and there were liberal splatters of the clotted, dark liquid close to the door. Sure signs of a struggle.

*Looks like we’re too late.*

Boyd grunted under his breath.

“Quickly,” Stanztrigger moved at a sprint, pistol at the ready.

Now Boyd had trouble keeping up. The speed with which Stanztrigger raced into the bridge was astounding. By the time Boyd had followed, the Moreau was stood on the fringes, head down, and eyes shut.

Boyd stopped and groaned inwardly. It may have dimly lit, but the butchery was easy to see. The circles of terminals and monitors that circled the captain’s chair were

liberally coated in blood, and the smell of putrid flesh troubled the air. The silence was oppressive, and the faintest hint of gunpowder left a subtle inflection on Boyd's tongue. Weapons had been fired here, presumably in some desperate attempt to hold Calci at bay. He glanced downward. Spent cartridges left a trail from the door to the concentric circles of monitors. It was cold, even more so than the rest of the ship.

Not to be impeded by the terminals in his way, Stanztrigger vaulted over them. He then knelt, vanished from sight.

With much more caution, Boyd moved after him, making his way between the decrepit computer stations with tentative steps as his gaze and his pistol swept the darkened bridge. He saw the remains of two Moreaus, ripped apart and gorged upon, their fate illuminated only by stuttering monitor screens and the meagre lights that hung from the darkened ceiling. Their dismembered bodies were awash with blood. One had a look of horror frozen upon her kitten features. The other body didn't even have a head.

Finally he found Stanztrigger. Cradling a further victim in his arms, he was rocking back and forth, the hair about his eyes was wet with tears. The victim—a tiny girl with a sparrow head—was little more than a head, shoulders and a spine. Her beak was open, tongue protruding, and her eyes were wide and lifeless.

“Stanztrigger? Look, I'm sor—”

The Moreau's head went back, and his agonised howl rent the air. Such was its pain, such was its energy and anger, that a shiver went up Boyd's spine. When the Moreau was done, he stood, lowering the girl to the deck with reverence. Turning to Boyd, he moved toward him, fists clenched and teeth bared.

In reflex, Boyd raised his pistol. He'd seen that look on hundreds of people's faces, and they'd all wanted to kill him. “Stanztrigger?”

The Moreau reached him but, looking past, merely pushed Boyd aside. With shoulders hunched and head down, with eyes blazing and breath steaming, Stanztrigger bore down on one of the operational terminals.

*What's he doing? I don't like the look of this...*

Boyd stepped toward Stanztrigger slowly. “Stanztrigger? Hey, mate. You okay?”

Stanztrigger ignored him. With succinct and rapid movements, he tapped out a sequence on the terminal before him. In response, the computer chimed in a tiny voice, and Stanztrigger grasped a microphone attached to the station by a flex. “This,” he said, eyes focused somewhere far away, “is Stanztrigger. The *Tower* has been infected. As I speak Calci are sweeping through the vessel. All remaining crew are ordered to abandon ship immediately. Do not engage the Calci. I repeat, do not engage the Calci. Those who survive will rendezvous at the ruins to the west. Those who encounter the Calci and are bitten are ordered to take their own lives, or face an eternal damnation. May The Lord go with you. Stanztrigger out.”

Boyd reached Stanztrigger, and touched him gently on the arm. “It's okay, Stanztrigger. We can beat these Calci. We'll sweep each deck—”

“You're naïve to the point of idiocy, human. It's over. Crepitus wins again.”

“So, what are you gonna do?” Boyd's voice rose, and his grip in the Moreau's arm tightened. “Just give in? Let the Calci take your ship?”

Stanztrigger laughed a sardonic, bitter laugh. “Take my ship? I think not.” Again his clawed fingers began to move over the computer. “If we can’t have the *Tower*, neither can the Calci. I won’t allow it. Nor will I allow my crews’ souls to be trapped in those cadaverous cages.”

*Boyd? Be careful. I think he’s goin—*

“Me too,” Boyd whispered before, tightening his grip still further and pulling the Moreau to face him, he said, “Stanztrigger, don’t do it. If you blow up the *Tower*, that’s it, we’re done. Without your ship to cannibalise, we haven’t a prayer of repairing the *Troika*. We’ll be trapped on this planet. For good.”

“I’ve survived fifty years. I can survive a further fifty.”

“Bully for you. But we can’t. *Tatiana* can’t—”

“That’s no concern of mine, human.” With a sweep of his arm, Stanztrigger struck Boyd in the ribs. Lungs voided, Boyd’s eyesight darkened, and a dull roar filled his ears as the blow lifted him from his feet and propelled him through the air. With an “Oooff!” he hit the deck, *Tatiana* landing beside him. The impact seemed to rouse her, and she groaned, eyes still shut as her face contorted with pain. Boyd lay, scrabbling for his senses. He tried to get up, but all he could muster some ill coordinated fit. He couldn’t breathe, his eyesight was all blues and blacks, and all sound about him was muffled and without texture.

Stanztrigger turned back to the computer. A further sequence of rapid keystrokes, and it was done. First one klaxon sounded, then another, and then another. Soon the bridge rang to the sound, the chorus joined by more distant klaxons in the corridor beyond, and then the spinal chamber beyond that. Multi-layered and spectral, they had a lamenting quality.

“The self-destruct sequence is initiated,” Stanztrigger said, turning to Boyd. “Now we have fifteen minutes to get off the *Tower*.”

*To be continued...*

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